DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 360 472 CE 063 670

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TITLE Connectiveness and Responsiveness.
PUB DATE Jun 93
NOTE 16p.; Keynote paper for the Feminist Pedagogy and Women-Friendly Perspectives in Distance Education International Working Conference (Umea, Sweden, June 10-13, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Education; *Adult Educators; *Distance Education; Educational Practices; Females; Feminism; Foreign Countries; *Holistic Approach; *Teacher Response; Teacher Role; *Teacher Student Relationship; *Womens Education

ABSTRACT

Distance educators must become more connected with and responsive to their students by developing their understanding of how unity, diversity, and interdependence operate in learners' environments. Many of the holistic strategies for promoting connectedness with female distance learners in particular have strong links to existing feminist theories, practice, and values. Holistic strategies that can be used to connect with distance learners include the following: applying thematic and interdisciplinary treatments when structuring course content; using multiple sources of information (including autobiographical, artistic, and dramatic expression); seeking patterns in real-life contexts or simulations; identifying and legitimizing the positive and negative feelings that are often associated with personal change and learning; using learning partnerships that do not depend on expert knowledge; promoting context-sensitive thinking; designing gender-sensitive learning environments and course content; and helping women learn to talk about how their role as adult learners connects with and/or conflicts with their other life roles. Distance educators should take the following steps to increase their responsiveness: examine their professional language, promote those research results that are applicable for women, develop feminist transformative models of teaching and learning, and reflect on their practice. (Twenty-four holistic strategies and 46 references are included.) (MN)

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Connectiveness and Responsiveness

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Keynote Paper for the
Feminist Pedagogy and Women-Friendly
Perspectives in Distance Education
International Working Conference

Umeå, Sweden
10th - 13th June 1993

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Connectiveness and Responsiveness

Elizabeth J. Burge

Introduction

Eighty years ago, i.e., in 1913, a six year old English girl called Elspeth went with her parents to live in Thika in Kenya. That journey and their subsequent life in a very challenging country provided enough memories for that little girl to later write a book which is still regarded as a classic of its autobiographical type: The Flame Trees of Thika, by Elspeth Huxley (New York: William Morrow, 1959). For us women in distance education, the book shows women struggling to survive in conditions and contexts not of their original choice. Young Elspeth was adventuresome, curious, and an astute observer of people, things, animals and events. Toward the end of the family's stay in Thika, at the time of the first world war, Elspeth and her mother, Tilly, were talking with a neighbour, Lettice, who was leaving Kenya (after a tumultuous time there) to return to England.

Listen to young Elspeth and the two women as they discussed Lettice's preparations to leave:

> Lettice replied that she wanted to take [her dogs] with her to England; no one here could look after Pekinese. I asked:
>
> "And bring them back again?"
>
> "If I come back."
>
> "But you can't *not* come back!"
>
> Lettice smiled. "Yes, I suppose it seems the centre of the world to you. But when you get home you will find it all looks different; as for myself, I don't belong here, it is a cruel country that will take the heart out of your breast and grind it into powder, powdered stone. And no one will mind, that is the worst of it. No one will mind."
>
> I did not understand her meaning, and asked her what would happen to the farm, and the stone house they had built, and the ponies.
>
> "Don't ask so many questions," Tilly said. "It is bad manners."
>
> "But if I don't ask questions, how shall I find out things?"
>
> "You are not supposed to be a private detective."

> "All the same, that is quite an interesting point," Lettice remarked. "The best way find out things, if you come to think of it, is not to ask questions at all. If you fire off a question, it is like firing off a gun; bang it goes, and everything takes flight and runs for shelter. But if you sit quite still and pretend not to be looking, all the little facts will come and peck round your feet, situations will venture forth from thickets and intentions will creep out and sun themselves on a stone; and if you are very patient, you will see and understand a great deal more than a man with a gun" (Huxley, 1959, pp. 248).

Lettice's advice is relevant for us today. This conference is about us finding things out, identifying our feelings, claiming our individual expertise, confirming the wisdom of our peers, and exploring new ideas. We are focussing on connections, not separations. Unlike Lettice, who left Kenya feeling emotionally bruised and uncared for by many people, we do mind about any cruelty and isolation in our world of education; we do care about what kinds of connections we and others make in learning and teaching. I ask you to consider Lettice's way of finding things out, because I think it contains much wisdom. That wisdom is not based on compliance or passivity; it is based in connectedness to context and responsiveness. Such qualities we have in ourselves but they are not explored in depth in our literature, nor acknowledged extensively by men as strengths of women educators.

Therefore, I want to talk with you to explore, using this printed text as a base, what it might mean for distance educators to become more connected with their contexts, I will focus on what I think are the key strategies for promoting this connectedness. I ask you to think about how my exploration and strategies can be linked strongly to existing feminist theories, practice and values. From our collective resources we will make more progress in promoting connectedness and responsiveness.

Connectedness

While Lettice could not make happy connections with the countryside of Thika, she could explain with passion and eloquence how someone can connect with and find out information. A state of relaxed attentiveness to context is needed so that the context may be seen for what it is - a complex collective of "facts... situations... and intentions." Astute observation, humility, and some reflective wisdom guide an enquirer into seeing both the components of a context and the processes by which those components interact. Clark (1991) refers to the factors of components and processes in his discussion of holistic thinking. He believes that holistic thinking is supported by the three principles of unity, diversity and interdependence. Unity refers to the interconnectedness of everything in a context. Diversity refers to the mix of environmental qualities, functions and species that are necessary for the stable operation of that context. Interdependence refers to the complex set of communication, organizational and other processes necessary for the context to stay viable.

I believe that we as distance educators have to develop our understanding of how unity, diversity and interdependence operate in learners' environments, especially those we help to create with our learners. I believe, however, that this task of understanding is easier for many women because we have been conditioned to be context-sensitive and to use responsive strategies. And acting as "a man with a gun" in a complex environment does not usually yield positive results. How then could we approach the task? My current response is to develop this notion of holistic education. What does it mean to think holistically, to see connectedness in everything we do? Let us look at some explanations on holistic education before thinking about actual strategies.

Holistic Education[1]

Holism in education is not a new concept: its history extends as far back as to Socrates and Plato (Miller, 1988), with comparatively more recent advocates being Maria Montessori, Rudolf Steiner and A. S. Neill. As Miller points out, the renewed interest in holistic education is evidence of a wider, global transformation of perspective towards a holistic paradigm. But what do we mean by a holistic approach? Definitions abound from many different fields but they all focus on two things: the inter-connectedness of reality and the concept of wholeness, as distinct from reductionism and fragmentation. A recent review by a woman scholar of changes in the conceptualizations of structures in science, society and religion indicates a trend away from reductionist and materialist approaches toward holistic approaches that emphasize unity within diversity (Lemkow, 1990). Lemkow describes eleven points that lead to a "consistent and lawful universe" in which all life forms are "interdependent and interpenetrating" with "mutually defining polarities" and other individual differences. In another review, Harman argues that the empirical research approach in science has definite limits for our understanding of complex phenomena. He believes that an alternative research model is needed - a holistic one that works "on the basis of an ontological assumption of oneness and wholeness, and on epistemological choice to include as input both physical sense data and inner, subjective experience" (Harman, 1992, p. 21).

Wholeness and interconnectedness operate within and across all dimensions of human experience and the natural world. A holistic perspective recognizes that we are physical, psychological, familial, social, economic, political, and spiritual beings. Certain cultures have long valued the tacit processes and outcomes of intuitive thinking, dreams, metaphors and other such non-rational activity, and other cultures have to respect those processes and outcomes. Industrial and technological cultures tend to stress the rational, analytical and logical processes that support the tasks of analysis, prediction and control (Maxfield, 1990).

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[1]In this and the next section, I make use of some material written for the proceedings of a conference (see Burge, 1993a).

Consider how some contemporary educators define holistic education. Jack Miller places his focus on relationships:

> ...between linear thinking and intuition, the relationship between mind and body, the relationship between various domains of knowledge, the relationship between the individual and community, and the relationship between self and Self (Miller, 1988, p. 3).

So does Anna Lemkow in her plea for integration:

> What students around the world need is an educational environment imbued with an understanding of the commonality of knowledge and experience that promotes seeing the interrelationship and the complementarity of science, philosophy, art and spirituality and that relates personal life to the social welfare. Students need also to understand the orders of nature and their relationship to and meaningful role vis-à-vis nature (Lemkow, 1990, p. 286).

Virginia Griffin (1990; 1989) uses the metaphor of making music on a six-string guitar, as distinct from a one-string instrument, to illustrate the richer, holistic results gained when all human capabilities are used. She defines holistic education for adults in terms of the dynamics of learning:

> ...a process that allows and encourages the unfolding of the whole person through provision of opportunities to develop rational, emotional, metaphoric (intuitive), relational, physical and spiritual capabilities and to exercise them in various segments of his/her life (e.g., family, learning peers, work, community, environ-ment/earth, world community, aesthetic world, cosmos). By becoming attuned to these capabilities as they operate in each of these settings, the learner is able to step back from him/herself to observe the unity and beauty of the "whole" of the human being (Griffin, 1990, p. 2-3).

Myles Horton explained to Paul Freire some of his adult education activity at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee in the following terms:

> We taught a lot of things that they needed to know... speeches... parliamentary law... But they also needed, we thought, a lot of other things. We tried to involve everybody in singing and doing drama and dancing and laughing and telling stories, because that's a part of their life. It's more of a holistic approach to education, not just a bunch of unrelated segments (Horton & Freire, 1990, pp. 168-9).

Also associated with holistic education are the humanist education models of Maslow (1954) and Rogers (1983) because they focus on the well-rounded growth of individuals and the recognition of the relational elements in learning. Dorothy MacKeracher (in press) refers to various holistic issues in her important discussion of how educators currently understand and treat women as learners. I ask you in this conference to contribute examples of relevant issues from the feminist education literature. Let me now turn to strategies.

Holistic Strategies

Holistic strategies related to adult learners are gaining attention (Maxfield, 1990; Griffin, 1990, 1989; Smith, 1988; Samples, 1987; Melamed, 1987; Ferguson 1987). These strategies generally can be grouped under six categories: 1) regulating consciousness, 2) developing an alert, open, flexible mind in a physically relaxed body, 3) accessing information that was stored unconsciously, 4) getting new ideas from old information, 5) seeing the familiar as unfamiliar, and 6) engaging in creativity. In using holistic strategies with adult learners, educators have to confront three major issues. The first is the potentially inhibiting effects on the adult's self-concept and self-esteem when new cognitive and affective connections among values and behaviours and knowledge are possible only by jettisoning some earlier learning. The second issue is equally important - the gender-related differences in the life conditions, behaviours, needs, etc. of women and men. The third issue is the problem of bias and prejudice and stereotyping regarding age, sexuality and ethnicity. Our conference addresses in depth the second issue, but the other two issues are relevant too.

The holistic strategies listed below are generic ones I've either used myself or gathered from peers. Let us, in this conference, add to this list strategies we believe are more specific to women learners.

1) Use intuitive and creative thinking, not just analytical thinking (Denis & Richter, 1987; von Oech, 1986; Noddings & Shore, 1984).

2) Generate metaphors, analogies and images to represent knowledge and feelings (Samples, 1987, 1979).

3) Relate mind and body experiences (Miller, 1988).

4) Apply thematic and interdisciplinary treatments to the structuring of course content.

5) Use multiple sources of information including autobiographical, artistic and dramatic expression (Wilkinson, 1993).

6) Seek patterns in similarities, cycles, tendencies, sequences, etc. (von Oech, 1986) in real life contexts or simulations.

7) Identity and legitimize the positive and negative feelings that are often associated with personal change and learning.

8) Work in small peer groups without the omniscient (and perhaps controlling) presence of the teacher.

9) Use learning partnerships for helpful reflective activity that does not depend on expert knowledge (Robinson, Saberton & Griffin, 1985).

10) Explore in libraries with creative serendipitous intentions, not just search for known titles in a small area of knowledge.

11) Be in touch with one's own cultural heritage and respect that of others (no country is 'the greatest in the world').

12) Explain that relaxed silences in small or large groups may help the learner to integrate ideas and feelings, as well as think of questions to ask.

13) Use first-person language to celebrate one's personal life experience, one's values and one's new insights.

14) Promote relative, context-sensitive thinking:

> In relativistic thinking, students discover that knowledge can only be understood in relation to the context in which it was developed, that anyone can contribute to the knowledge base which is used in each context, and that truth is what makes sense within each context (MacKeracher, in press).

15) Work toward a Constructed Kind of Knowing (Belenky et al 1986):

> Constructed knowing develops when the individual is able to integrate the subjective knowledge she feels is personally important with valued received knowledge to create newly constructed or modified knowledge, when she is able to combine connected and separate procedural knowing, and when the self becomes an integral part of both the processes of knowing and the resulting knowledge. Constructed knowing provides the individual with a mature "voice of wisdom," is accompanied by increasing levels of self-esteem and self-confidence, and allows the learner to move beyond relativistic or contextual thinking and make personal commitments to the ideas generated and to the contexts and persons involved (MacKeracher, in press).

16) Design learning environments and course content that are gender-sensitive - that account for and respect women's particular experience and life conditions.

17) Use a wide repertoire of information gathering and processing skills (Burge, 1993b; Collette, 1990) that involve both sides of the brain.

18) Promote playfulness in exploring ideas and feelings (Melamed, 1987).

19) Gather original information from personal or others' experience, process the new information with reflective observations, develop some abstract ideas or principles, then try them out with active experiments (Kolb, 1984).

20) Show or outline the content of a course with a bird's eye view to survey the whole, before taking a worm's eye view to focus on specific details (Pask, 1988).

21) Set learning objectives that help integrate one's developing self-concept and self-esteem with the course content (MacKeracher, in press).

22) Think about personal maturity in terms of developing both responsibility to self and responsiveness to others.

23) Promote the fourth model of teaching proposed by Patricia Cross: "I develop people", as distinct from the other three models, viz, "I teach what I know", or "I teach what I am", or "I develop minds" (Cross, 1988).

24) Help women learners talk about how their role as adult learners connects with and/or conflicts with their other life roles and their rights to personal time.

Two dozen strategies is enough for a beginning! When we have added women-specific ones, let us try to categorize them in ways that celebrate diversity within wholeness, for that integration is crucial for the health of our education environment.

Responsiveness

Now it is time for another kind of responsiveness - an internal one. How else should we think about holistic approaches for our students and our contexts, beyond using specific strategies? I offer here four responses and then ask you for your responses.

1) **Examine our professional language**, since it conditions our thinking and our dialogue about that thinking.

1.1 Look for connectedness between the concepts we use, e.g., talk not just about delivery of the information to be learned, but also dialogue about that information as part of the learning process.

1.2 Explore certain concepts in more depth, especially key ones such as dialogue, relevance and inclusion.

We could also examine that word "support", so often used! Do learners need crutches? Are they "in deficit?" Or do they need confirmation that what they're experiencing is legitimate, and not destructive of self esteem? Do they need not benevolent support but the respectful responsiveness that any paying client should get from a service provider?

1.3 Protest the terms which perpetuate the exclusions and fragmentations caused by sexism, racism, ageism, and cultural stereotypes. Many sets of guidelines now exist (Eichler, 1988; American Psychological Association 1983). Distance educators could avoid thinking of discussions in such combative terms as "the cut and thrust of academic debate" (heard in a male dominated distance education conference. In our conferences, we must create the conditions to talk to each other as authentic, open-minded individuals (as distinct from well-defended, self-aggrandizing ones) who connect with and articulate the personal values, feelings and biases that influence their work.

1.4 Examine the metaphors and images we use (Haughey, 1991). We may understand more about all the nuances and relational dynamics of a setting in a single word or phrase of a metaphor than in lines of prose. For example, some students I know think that the metaphor of "white water rafting" captures their feelings of dealing with the volume and speed of messages in a class mediated by computer conferencing (Burge, 1993b). As another example, we should look specifically for metaphors and images from the domestic and private worlds of women, as well as from their work worlds.

2) **Promote the research results that are applicable for more than half our learners, i.e., women.** Our greater use of qualitative methods can illuminate the complexities and realities of women's lives - as they perceive them. The work of Belenky and her colleagues (1986) was one landmark example for our understanding of how knowledge is produced and construed, especially regarding connections to self and others' knowledge and experience, and regarding ownership and use of knowledge. Gilligan's work on the caring model of moral reasoning, as distinct from the (male) justice model, is another example (MacKeracher, in press). As a whole, the distance education literature pays yet comparatively little serious attention to gender differences despite important work being done by practitioners and researchers (for example, this conference, Grace,

1991; Kirkup & von Prümmer, 1990; Coats, 1989; Faith, 1988). How are women's views of how they operate in the world both legitimized and celebrated? How then are these views connected to the survival of our world?

3) **Develop feminist transformative models of teaching and learning**. Such models value personal growth, facilitate significant changes in perceptions, and promote critical cognitive abilities (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow developed a transformation theory about how adults may develop by them challenging their old assumptions and creating new meanings that are "more inclusive, integrative, discriminating, and open to alternative points of view" (Mezirow, 1991:224). He distinguishes his perspective from stimulus-response mechanisms or cognitive science and information processing theories; such approaches, he argues, are of limited use in the facilitation of significant learning for adults (1991:7). Where are our feminist models? Two examples of women distance educators' interest in learner change are the narratives of helping learners move from relative passivity, dependence and silence to pro-activity, interdependence and self-expression (Burge & Haughey, 1993; Modra, 1989). Such efforts are not easy to implement!

4) **Reflect on our practice**. Patterns of activity and connections may be seen in the relative calm of recollection and analysis. Interactions and consequences that may have been lost in the 'heat' of the interactive moment or squashed later by psychological defence mechanisms may be retrieved in reflection afterwards. The work of Connelly & Clandinin (1988), Hunt (1992, 1987), Newman (1991), Schön (1992, 1983), and Witherell & Noddings (1991), for example, has helped me to reflect by showing how others have drawn out the connections and paradoxes in their experience. Witherell & Noddings add some passion to their understanding of reflection:

> Stories can join the worlds of thought and feeling, and they give special voice to the feminine side of human experience - to the power of emotion, intuition, and relationships in human lives. They frequently reveal dilemmas of human caring and conflict, illuminating with the rich, vibrant language of feeling the various landscapes in which we meet the other morally (Witherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 4).

Let us also gather narratives and reflections in this conference and celebrate their wisdom and practicality.

In Conclusion

Several friends and colleagues, and especially Eila Öhrmark in Helsinki, have helped me think through this paper and its relevance to my own personal and professional lives. I am still intrigued, however, by the puzzles and dilemmas that have to accompany the use of a holistic perspective. When can the goals of connectedness and responsiveness not operate in one's life? When might my needs and values around inclusions and relationships, for example, operate to become intrusive for friends or my students? Or, how do I manage with equanimity that anxious time of apparent inaction or loss of ideas that so often precedes much action or great creativity? My friends and colleagues help me to accept that trying to live holistically is not easy sometimes! It appears to require, in part, the enquirer's humility and alertness that Lettice advised for young Elspeth.

My conclusion is that a holistic approach is an appropriate goal for us. It does not mean being compliant or passive, but it does mean being courageous, connected and responsive. Let us, therefore, strengthen our courage and find more ways to connect, to respond, and to be sustained.

* * *

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